

This 'heart of the family' awaits a new heart

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Felix Aguirre has always been close to his family. The oldest of four siblings, he's known for putting the needs of his relatives above his own.

A recent diagnosis of [heart](#) failure has reaffirmed those relationships.

Aguirre's heart troubles started in December 2014 when, shortly before Christmas, he learned he had [heart failure](#)—the result, he was told, of a lung infection that had spread to his heart.

For the then-25-year-old from Dallas, the next six months were nothing short of a nightmare. His condition worsened, and he was in and out of the hospital for two to three days at a time. By May 2015, Aguirre said he felt so sick he didn't think he'd pull through.

"[The medical staff] told me they couldn't do anything else," he said. "That I either went home on hospice or, you know, [could] wait there at the hospital and just die there, I guess."

Aguirre's doctors told him that he needed a left ventricular assist device, a surgically implanted pump that helps the heart's main pumping chamber distribute blood to the rest of the body. Finally, in August 2016 the pump was inserted. It immediately made a difference.

"His heart was so weak—[it had gotten] so weak over those two years that he increasingly required the use of an intravenous medication to help his heart beat stronger," said cardiologist Dr. Mark H. Drazner. He is medical director of the heart transplant and [ventricular assist device](#) programs at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, where Aguirre was treated.

But those medicines only help in the short-term, Drazner said.

This wasn't the family's only hardship. While Aguirre was battling heart failure, his stepfather died of brain cancer.

"It was just horrible," Aguirre said.

Amid the adversity, there was also some happiness: Aguirre proposed to his girlfriend, Juanita Sanchez, and the couple, who had met through mutual friends from high school, married in November 2016.

Sanchez had been dating Aguirre for two years when he was diagnosed with heart failure. She said it was devastating to see the energetic and adventurous man she knew be forced to stop working. Moreover, his frustrations with his health left him depressed, lethargic and moody.

"Being young, we didn't really know, or I didn't know, what we were in for or how fast things were going to change," said the 26-year-old county tax collection representative.

But Sanchez was determined to stay by Aguirre's side no matter what the future had in store. They were buoyed by friends and family, who rallied around them offering not only encouragement but help planning their wedding.

Now, the focus is supporting Aguirre while he waits for a new heart.

To prepare for a transplant, Aguirre, now 28, has begun going to the gym every day, to lose weight. He has also made major changes to his diet, phasing out pork and beef, cutting back on salt and eating more chicken and salad.

He has a weakness for his mother's Mexican dishes, though, and now and then will go to her house to indulge, just a little. (To help her son, she now cooks with less salt.)

"It's been difficult," said Aguirre. "But I mean, I know if I don't follow [a healthy diet], I know I'm going to be the one suffering."

Sanchez said she admires her husband's discipline. "I've never seen

someone fight for their life as hard as [my husband] has," she said. "To me, he's like my superhero.

"He's like the heart of the family," she added. "Everyone just wants to see him win."

Aguirre is working again and was recently promoted to manager of an auto parts store. He said he worries about what the future holds for him and his wife. He wants to get healthy before they have children.

He sees life very differently now. "I used to think, like, let's go party it's all about having fun, blah, blah, blah," he said. "Really and truly ... it's about family."

As he waits for a [new heart](#), Aguirre said that, as in the past, he is leaning on his faith to help him keep a positive outlook.

"All we had to have is hope," he said.

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